

## The Hawkins Three by Nonymos

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** 80s trauma victims make do, Angst and Fluff, Dungeons & Dragons, F/M, Gayer Things, Hurt/Comfort, M/M, Multi, OT3, Polyamory, Post Season 2, babysitter steve activate!, everyone needs so much therapy, jonathan has an inferiority complex, lots of teens and pre-teens figuring their shit out, nancy's tired of all the bullshit, some casual homophobic slurs, steve lives in denial, the answer to every love triangle, the byers boys need hugs

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Steve Harrington & Will Byers

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-11-20

**Updated:** 2017-11-20

**Packaged:** 2022-04-03 04:54:14

**Rating:** Explicit

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 15,742

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

It's two weeks after the Snow Ball, Nancy's officially with Jonathan, and Steve is trying to move forward. If only he wasn't on a path that keeps circling back to the both of them.

## The Hawkins Three

### Author's Note:

Hi old readers, new readers, so glad to share this fic with you! Sometimes I get whacked over the head by another fandom and I belt out a fic for them in defiance of God, RL, and all the other things I have to write. This is one of those times, because *oh my GOD*, just let Nancy date both. Just let her date both of them. And also just let Steve and Jonathan date each other. Just. Let the three of them do their thing. Just LET THEM.

No particular warnings save for a few homophobic slurs and spoilers for Stranger Things S2. Thank you so much to [alby\\_mangroves](#) for the speedy, quality beta!

Enjoy!

*Everything was going well for King Steve in his high school kingdom. He was so popular no one ever dared to call him a jerkwad. Then Princess Nancy started hanging out with creepy Jester Jonathan, which lit a fire of jealousy in King Steve's heart, and made him do some pretty jerkwad-y things. But as it turned out, the Princess was only trying to help the Jester, whose little brother had been abducted by a faceless monster that ate people, tore through walls and fucked with electrical lights. At first, King Steve was admittedly taken a little off-guard, but thankfully, he had his*

*trusty bat-sword; he ruined it with carpentry nails and also lost his crown somewhere along the way, but in the end his bat was much cooler for it, and Steve himself much more mature. The Princess still loved him, Jester Jonathan got his little brother back, and so they all lived happily ever after.*

Yeah.

Sure.

Then Nancy started freaking out and getting drunk and telling Steve she didn't love him. And *then* the faceless monster came back, only this time there were, like, twenty of them—not that Steve had any real problem with *them*; honestly, he's so over faceless monsters. Billy Hargrove was the one to kick his ass. Meanwhile, Nancy eloped with Jonathan, for real this time, and Steve somehow ended up babysitting four goddamn kids hell-bent on running *towards* danger. He couldn't even keep them from setting the literal underworld on fire, which pretty much saved the day, though nobody else seemed to notice. This time, Steve didn't even try to get Nancy back; in fact, he flat-out told her to be with Jonathan.

Well, she didn't *want* Steve. And cool, mature guys don't harass a girl who doesn't want them. (They do hang around her house wistfully, listen to sad songs in their car, and manfully wipe their tears before driving home. Not that anyone needs to know about *that*.)

\*

So now it's two weeks after the Snow Ball and Steve is trying out this stoic loner attitude where he keeps to himself at school and walks home gazing into the distance, nursing his broken heart and reflecting on his new incredibly cool maturity.

Of course, Dustin usually appears on his bike to grill him about hair products and girls, which kind of kills Steve's vibe.

"Ignoring girls seems kind of counter-productive," Dustin is saying

today. He's pedaling so slowly he has trouble maintaining his balance, and his front wheel keeps swerving dangerously towards Steve's shins. "I mean, they're already ignoring *me*."

"Yes, they are. And how's that working out for them?" Steve says patiently. Being cool and mature also means mentoring the youth, after all.

"Son of a bitch, you're right," Dustin says, frowning. He still has a slight lisp despite his new teeth. "But if I'm ignoring them and they're ignoring me, how are any of us supposed to get anything done?"

"Simple. It's a game of chicken."

"Son of a bitch," Dustin repeats.

"You never told me how the Snow Ball went, by the way."

"Oh, you were right. I looked awesome. Like a million bucks." Dustin looks at the ground. "Nobody danced with me, though."

Steve feels a pang. "Well, girls that age are pretty stupid."

"Yeah, that's what Nancy said."

"Nancy?"

"Yeah! *She* danced with me at one point." Even when half-sad, Dustin has the weird ability to smile with his entire face. "Your girlfriend's all right, Harrington."

"She's not my girlfriend anymore," Steve says with cool, mature stoicism.

"What?" Dustin's eyes grow wide. "Ohh. Is she with Jonathan now?"

"Uh, yeah," Steve says, trying to sound airy and careless. "Yeah, I guess so."

As if summoned by her son's name, Joyce Byers' car slides down the street and stops right next to Dustin, who startles and swerves his bike too hard, making Steve trip into the front wheel. Joyce winces in

sympathy and gives them both a little wave.

“Hello, Mrs Byers,” Steve says through the pain in his shins, struggling not to hop around. “How are... things?”

“Oh, it’s all right, everything’s all right,” she says quickly.

There’s an awkward pause, because they’re actually discussing whether any new gates to hell opened lately. Dustin’s impervious to awkwardness and just beams at their pinched looks. “What’s up, Mrs Byers?”

“Oh, well...” She looks like she’d rather Dustin not be there, which is probably a bad sign. “Actually, Steve, I was wondering... but maybe that’s a not a very good idea...”

“You can ask me anything, Mrs Byers, honest,” Steve says, and means it. Poor Joyce Byers went through hell and back, and then she went there again, and then back *again*. Steve looks at her and wants to skip straight past being an alcoholic and directly into attending AA meetings.

“Thanks,” she says. “Well—you know how I’d rather not leave Will alone...”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Steve jokes, and they both fake-laugh for way too long because it’s really not funny. Even Dustin seems to regret not biking away in time after all. Joyce’s laughter tapers off into embarrassed silence, and then she clears her throat.

“Well, I’m working late tonight, and—I mean, you’re the only one who knows what happened, and he might—he might need that, you know, someone who *knows*, someone who won’t treat him like he’s crazy, and you already know the boys, so do you think you could—maybe?”

“Sure!” Steve says, because cool and mature guys don’t shirk their responsibilities. Which doesn’t stop him from trying. “Guess Jonathan couldn’t do it, huh?”

“Well, he’s...” She goes pink. “I think he’s, um... he has a...”

This is Steve's punishment for trying to shirk. Instant shirking karma. Now he gets why Joyce was unsure about asking him to do this. "He's going out with Nancy."

"Well, yes." She winces. Steve devolves into silent nodding. Cool. Mature. They're both silent. It's so awkward.

Then they all startle when Dustin's walkie-talkie crackles to life, making him about collapse in relief. "Oh! Whoops, gotta answer that —bye, Steve! Bye, Mrs Byers!"

Steve makes a half-hearted gesture in his direction, not that Dustin sees it, being already around the corner. With a sigh of defeat, Steve runs his hand through his hair. "So... what time should I be there?"

Joyce's answering smile almost makes it worth the trouble.

\*

By the time he shows up to the Byers' house, Steve has more or less accepted his fate. Because of that, maybe, the universe rewards him by not letting him catch sight of either Nancy or Jonathan; in fact, Will Byers is the one to answer the door. He looks pale and small and embarrassed.

"Hi, Steve." He glances over his shoulder to check the whereabouts of his mother, then lowers his voice. "You don't have to do this, you know."

"It's all right, I'm happy to," Steve shrugs, trying to make it seem like he doesn't have a care in the world. Is he fooling anyone with that? Sometimes he wonders.

"No, I mean—you don't have to actually babysit me. You can just... watch TV, I guess. And I'll stay out of your way."

Joyce Byers suddenly appears in the hallway, looking stressed out as usual, which Steve honestly can't blame her for. "Oh, Steve, you're

here! Thank you for this, really—I'll pay you, of course..."

Steve protests, then Joyce protests his protesting, then Will tries to get them both to stop out-protesting each other, then Joyce realizes she's late and kisses her son goodbye then almost kisses Steve too, which leads to another round of mutual apologies until she realizes again how late she is and hurries out to her car.

Then she's actually gone, and Will's looking at Steve with those huge, dark eyes.

Despite his recent experience as a multitasking babysitter, Steve isn't sure what to say. Will is actually the one he knows the least, what with him being Jonathan's little brother and also a temporary puppet for a dark evil entity. Leading with that is probably a bad idea, though. Will looks drawn and tired, with dark circles under his eyes, kind of like Jonathan—which is a thought Steve firmly puts out of his mind. He doesn't want to think about Jonathan. Or Nancy.

"So... TV, huh?" he says.

Will seems to snap back to reality. "Oh yeah. It's in the kitchen."

Stepping further inside the house, Steve's relieved to see the crazy vines drawings are gone from the walls. No Christmas lights in sight either, which only barely makes the place less creepy. The Byers really should move. Except of course they're dirt poor, which Steve only remembers when he sees the tiny TV in the kitchen. Will looks vaguely ashamed and just gestures to it without saying anything.

Steve isn't really enthusiastic about watching that thing for hours on end, with a scared kid doing his best to keep quiet in the other room, both of them alone in a dark house. So instead he claps his hands. "How about some... hot chocolate?"

Will looks surprised, but warily nods. Steve has to ask where everything is, which gives them a topic of conversation for a solid two and a half minutes; then they're both sitting at the table in front of steaming mugs, and another awkward silence threatens to set in. Steve doesn't dare to ask him how he's been doing lately.

This time, Will is actually the one to clear his throat. “Thanks.”

“I mean, it’s your hot chocolate. If anything, I should be thanking you.”

“I meant thank you for... showing up.”

For the first time, Steve realizes maybe it’s not just Joyce Byers. Maybe Will also doesn’t want to be left alone, which wouldn’t be surprising at all. It’s a school night, his friends can’t be there, so any half-stranger will do in a pinch.

“Hey, of course I showed up. I said I would.”

“Yeah, but I mean, with Jonathan and everything...”

“What about Jonathan?” Steve says with an exaggerated frown, like he doesn’t even know where Will’s going with this. “*Oh*, you mean because of Nancy! No, that’s fine, that’s all right, really.”

Jonathan always did say his little brother was perceptive, and fuck him, he was right, because Will doesn’t look overly convinced. Steve drags his fingers through his hair again and frowns at his hot chocolate. “Well, Nancy just—she picked him, and you have to let girls choose, right? That’s what being a gentleman is all about.”

Will relaxes by a fraction. Maybe he was afraid Steve would—what? Take out his resentment on him? Steve thinks about what he knows of Jonathan’s father, and winces.

“Seriously, bud, that’s... that’s between me and Jonathan, anyway. You don’t have anything to do with this.” He only says what he says next because he’s desperate for another topic of conversation. “So what about you? How’re you doing on that front?”

“On that front?” Will looks scared again, which puzzles Steve until he remembers yet another tragic thing about the Byers family—both kids, Jonathan and Will, have been bullied at school for “being queer” for as long as Steve can remember.

There’s an inevitability to it; they’ve always been that weird family living on the edge of the woods, the one that’s easy to sneer at for no



reason. Without really knowing how, Steve's aware their own father joined in. Maybe he heard his own parents discussing it a few years back, or maybe Jonathan's implied it once—Jonathan doesn't really talk about himself, ever. But Steve really *doesn't* want to think about Jonathan. Or about his own bullying tendencies, back in the day.

He's been silent for way too long. "The girls front," he finishes lamely. And then, like an *idiot*: "Or boys, I guess?"

Will absolutely *gapes* at him.

Steve freezes like a deer in the headlights. What the hell did he just say? Oh, *God*, this is all Dustin Henderson's fault. One clingy kid and Steve is trying to trade secrets with all of them, as if he himself didn't hate teenagers on sight before he was one. Why is he even talking to a *twelve-year-old kid* about his *sexuality*? Why is *anyone* trusting Steve to babysit their traumatized spawn?

Will's face doesn't move, but his voice comes out in a whisper. "You like boys too?"

It's hopeful and tremulous and Steve almost knocks his chocolate to the floor. "What? *No!*"

Will freezes up again and Steve tries to get a hold of himself. "Sorry! Sorry. I just—wow. No. Nope. Sorry."

It doesn't make anything better. Will is still petrified. Of course he is; he just came out by mistake to a reformed bully.

"But—but that's... cool! That's great! If you're like that, I mean," Steve says with desperate conviction. "That's... *normal*."

Will blinks. "Normal," he says.

"*Yeah!*" Steve insists, suddenly determined. "You know what? People say it's not, but what the hell do they know? They haven't fought Demodogs and shadow monsters and I don't even know what else. Now *that*, that wasn't normal! Do you really feel like you're on that level? People have no idea what's normal and what's not. *We* do."

And, miracle of miracles, Will Byers smiles a tiny smile at him.

“Yeah,” he says. “We do.”

“Yeah. Wow.” Steve really looks at him. “So you’re not into ladies, huh? No luck at the Snow Ball?”

Will looks surprised. “Uh, yes. Actually. One girl asked me to dance. I didn’t even know her. She called me zombie boy.”

“While asking you to dance?” Steve asks, incredulous.

“Yeah.”

“Jeeze. I’d switch to boys too if that happened to me.”

Will *laughs*. Steve feels slightly less shitty. Score one for the cool, mature mentor.

“So, *do* you like anyone at school?” he says, wondering what the hell he’s going to do if Will says yes.

But Will shakes his head. “No. My friends, they’re just... my friends.”

“They don’t know? Does anybody know?”

“Just you,” Will murmurs.

“Well, your secret’s safe with me.” Steve drums his fingers on his knuckles for a moment, then just blurts it out—he can’t help it. “You honestly thought I was like that?”

He can’t be *offended* by that, not after his little speech on what’s normal, but he reserves the right to be confused. He’s known for being a lady killer! Or he was. Whatever.

“I don’t know,” Will shrugs. “What with you and Jonathan...”

“Me and *Jonathan*?” Steve yells.

Will freezes up again. Steve wants to punch himself.

“No—God, relax, I’m not *mad*.” He runs both hands through his hair, which is a sure sign of crisis, and tries very hard to stop shouting at the most traumatized kid in Hawkins. “Just, I’m just kind of

wondering what Jonathan's got to do with all this."

"I guess I was kind of hoping he was like me," Will mutters timidly. "Since he was always looking at you..."

"Oh," Steve says. "Oh, I'm sorry, bud, he was looking at Nancy. He likes Nancy, and I was with Nancy." He hesitates. "Besides, even if he was a q... Uh, even if he did bat for the other team, he wouldn't like *me*. You know? I've been a real jerk to him."

"I know," Will says with a faintly sly look. "You couldn't leave him alone."

"I—because—because I was a *jerk*," Steve insists. He doesn't remember ever being so desperate for anyone to recognize that. "I was a bully! Sort of! And now, well, now I'm alone and he's... he's with Nancy! So, you know, everyone's got what they deserved."

Will still doesn't look convinced. Probably because Steve isn't, either. He knows he did some bad stuff, but he doesn't really think he deserves to be on his own. He misses Nancy, and yeah, he even misses Jonathan, in a weird way. They hung out a lot for a couple of days after... everything, the first time around. But that was because—well, because they couldn't talk about it with anyone else. Also, there was some clean-up to do, a lot of repairs at the Byers' house, everyone helped. But eventually things went back to normal—Jonathan back to his creepy shadows, and Steve back to Nancy. God, Steve was *so* ready for things to be normal again.

But as it turned out, Nancy wasn't, and Steve didn't want to see it until it was too late.

"Sorry, kid," he repeats, slightly calmer. "I think both of us are pretty gone on Nance."

"Yeah," Will mumbles, staring down at the table. He looks so small and so lost, it's hard not to feel bad. But it was a long shot; two brothers, both queer? What are the odds? Of course Jonathan's not like that.

Steve still tries to sound encouraging. "But hey—you should tell your

friends. They fought a bunch of monsters for you, I'm sure they wouldn't even blink at that."

"I don't know." Will gives him a tiny smile again. "Maybe."

The noise of a car in the alley makes them both look up.

Steve is on his feet in less than a second—a habit he's not sure he'll ever shake, all the more so within five hundred yards of the Byers house. They aren't expecting anyone. His fingers instinctively reach for a bat that isn't there.

"I'll go see who it is," he says, very calmly. In all probability, it's Joyce; maybe her manager gave her the night off after all. But Steve's sense of probability is a bit fucked up these days. "Drink your hot chocolate, all right?"

Steve opens the front door to stand there in plain sight, hands on his hips, which is now his default strategy whenever danger's around. If anything's there, he's not gonna play hide and seek. He half-hopes it's Billy Hargrove again; the asshole has kept his distance ever since Max almost castrated him *via* nails-studded bat, but Steve can't imagine it's gonna last. And he owes the guy a few good punches.

Except the car door opens and *Jonathan freakin' Byers* comes out.

Steve's hands drop. "Jonathan?"

Jonathan freezes. Then he looks around as if to make sure he's at the right house. Then he looks at Steve again. "What... what are you doing here?"

"Babysitting," Steve says with an impatient wave, "but who cares—what's wrong, why are you here? Is Nancy all right?"

Jonathan looks even more awkward, like he was hoping to avoid that subject somehow. "Nancy's fine," he manages. "I just—I forgot my wallet."

"Oh." Steve looks behind him and spots the thing sitting on a table by the door. He grabs it, waves it with raised eyebrows to make sure it's the one, then tosses it to Jonathan who catches it, still staring.

Then Will appears by Steve's elbow, startling him. "Jonathan?"

"Will!" Jonathan is just like Joyce when it comes to Will Byers—his eyes go too wide and he looks like he wants to run to him. He very obviously tries to play it casual. "Hey, bud. Are you okay?"

Steve scowls. "Of course he's okay, Byers. I'm a fantastic babysitter. In fact, we're bonding! Right, Will?"

"Right," Will says. He looks at his brother. "Seriously. I'm okay."

"Okay," Jonathan echoes, still looking kind of nonplussed.

Steve opens his mouth to say something, then turns around and realizes Will vanished inside the house again. That kid moves like a freaking ghost. By the time he turns around, Jonathan's moved closer. He's fidgeting with his wallet and looking at Steve in that way he has, like he's trying to pin him there with his eyes. Steve wishes he would just go.

"Did my mom ask you to do this?" Jonathan asks eventually.

"Yeah, she said she was working late. And you were out." Steve's proud of his own voice, matter-of-fact. He is mature. And cool. He will babysit the brother of the guy who stole his girl, and he's not gonna be an ass about it. "Didn't want him to be all alone."

"Right."

Jonathan isn't handsome. Steve never thought he was. Bags under his eyes, thin lips, limp hair. Shabby clothes, though of course that's not his fault. But all the same, he's always been more mature than anyone else at Hawkins High. He's got a presence to him, the idea of something coming to fruition, growing into itself. Or maybe it's just the way he looks at people, with those dark, wary eyes. After all, he's had to take care of his family for a long time already, and he weathered some pretty drastic shit. Steve can sort of see why Nancy likes him, which weirdly makes him feel a bit better. Honorable competition and all that.

Then he remembers his conversation with Will and cuts that line of thinking *short*.

"Well, have a good one." He turns to get back inside.

"Steve, wait—"

"Look, we're cool, all right?" Steve says impatiently. "I already told Nancy. It's *fine*. Me and her, we wanted different things. And you guys, you both turned out to want the same thing, so it works better like this. It's *better*." He almost manages to convince himself.

"I guess I just want..." Then Jonathan holds out his hand, though he's several feet away. "Thank you."

"For Nancy?" Steve says stupidly.

Jonathan pulls a face. "No. It's not like you *gave* her to me."

"Trust me, buddy, I'm wildly aware," Steve says, coming down the front steps. "And you don't get to look at me like that when *you* were the one taking pictures of her from the bushes."

"That was a year ago!" Jonathan protests. "I was someone else back then!"

"Well, so was I! And—" Steve pauses, then looks away. "And so was she, I guess."

For some reason he thinks of Barb. If she wasn't dead, Nancy would probably still be with him. It's such an asshole thought, Steve loses all the steam of his own argument. He can't remember what he was trying to argue anyway. Sighing, he reaches for Jonathan, who blinks then startles and reaches out again.

And they shake hands. Steve's still not sure what he's being thanked for. Being the bigger man, maybe. It does feel like they're adults. For some reason—maybe a leftover of his jerk days—Steve's always figured Jonathan's hands would be cold and clammy, but they're warm.

"Good grip," he says, like an idiot.

Jonathan looks surprised, then almost pleased, as if Steve's opinion of him matters in any way. "Thanks."

They let go and Steve's heart twists. He doesn't really know why. It's like he's losing something. Well, of course he is; he's losing Nancy.

Jonathan hesitates, then half-steps backwards. "I should..."

It suddenly hits Steve that Nancy's probably in the car around the bend. He doesn't dare to look and just nods, waving him away. When he goes back inside the house, Will's sitting in the kitchen. He looks up at him.

"Not a word," Steve tells him.

Will looks innocent; he's good at that. Steve takes a sip from his mug and sure enough, it's cold.

In the end, they have a pretty good night—reheat the chocolate, watch a movie together, and the kid's asleep by the time Joyce gets back. Steve flees before she can pay him.

\*

The next day, Steve's eating alone at his lunch table by the window, nursing his newfound maturity by reflecting on the fragility of life or whatever, when a voice suddenly shocks him out of his thoughts.

"Hey, Steve."

It's *Nancy*.

Steve gapes like an idiot for two painfully long seconds. She's wearing a pale blue, fuzzy mohair sweater. It lights up her eyes and the look of embarrassment there. Her hair falls in soft chesnut curls around her face, tips brushing under her jaw like a kiss. God, she's so pretty.

"Can I... sit?"

"Yeah. Uh, yeah." He still can't close his mouth, exactly like Jonathan

the night before. And why the hell is he thinking about Jonathan Byers? Nancy's *there*. She's sitting *with him*.

"You know, we didn't really have time to talk," she says. "After everything."

This must be what a panic attack feels like. Steve was prepared to explain the Nancy situation to everyone *but* Nancy. He thought at least *they* would never have to rehash it. "What... what do you want to talk about?"

"The Demodogs?" she says, puzzled. "Among other things, I guess?"

"Oh."

"You sound relieved."

"I am!" Steve exclaims. "Everyone wants to talk about *relationships*. Monsters! Monsters are what's important!"

"Who's talking to you about relationships?"

"Everyone!" Steve insists, because he's not going to say *Dustin Henderson*. "And I keep telling them, it's fine. I'm fine. You made your choice."

Nancy looks hurt, which sort of rubs Steve the wrong way. It *was* her choice.

"You told me it was okay," Nancy says.

"Well, it was. Like I said, it's fine."

She sighs. "It's happening again, isn't it? It was the exact same thing last year, only in reverse. It's like you and Jonathan are chasing each other away."

"Why are we talking about relationships?" Steve despairs. "We were going to talk about monsters."

"That's actually my point. We fought—" She lowers her voice. "We fought *monsters* together. We have this huge secret between the three



of us...”

“Well, there’s also Hopper and Joyce Byers and about half a dozen kids, you know,” Steve says quickly, not sure why hearing her say *the three of us* makes him so twitchy.

“You wanted to act like it had never happened,” she goes on, talking over him. “Now it’s happened again, and we beat them again, and you say you *want* to talk about it this time, but we’re not talking at *all*.”

She waits for him to say something. Steve’s mouth opens but all that comes out is a noncommittal creak.

Nancy sighs again. “Dustin usually walks home with you after school, right?”

“He told me you danced with him at the Snow Ball,” Steve’s mouth says without his consent. “That... that was pretty cool of you.”

“See? That’s what I mean. You’re friends with *Dustin Henderson*, but you won’t even hang out with me anymore.”

“Hang out? We—we broke up!” Steve finally bursts out, indignant. “You broke up with me!”

“I didn’t *break up* with you,” Nancy protests.

Steve gives a memorable scoff. “No? You’re doing a pretty staggering impression of it, then. I could’ve sworn you were on a date with Jonathan just yesterday.”

“No! I mean—yes! Yes, I’m with Jonathan,” Nancy says with a slight hint of defiance, as if she won’t be shamed for it. Her lips are always pressed tight; Steve loves it when they’re curling into a smile, but right now they’re flat and Nancy’s jaw is set. “What I meant is, there wasn’t a moment where I *actually* broke up with you. You just sort of decided I had, because I cared about Barb more than I cared about parties. And then you said you were a shitty boyfriend, told me to go with Jonathan, and *vanished*.”

Steve’s speechless. What the hell was he supposed to do? Nancy

couldn't even tell him she loved him. She picked Jonathan, it's pretty clear. So that means it's Steve's turn to fade into the background, like Jonathan did the year before. That's how it *works*.

Nancy sighs for the third time, like she's reading his thoughts. "Like I said. You guys are making me choose again."

"What are you *trying* to say?" Steve asks incredulously. "That you want to... stay friends, or something? I don't know if I'm ready for that. I'm..." He glances around, then talks more quietly, staring at the table. "I'm *hurt*, Nance, all right?"

It's stupid, and it's shameful, but it feels good to say it out loud. It hurts even now; she's so close, in her fuzzy blue sweater over her thin, willowy frame. She's hugged him once wearing it, so he knows exactly how it would feel if she did it again.

Nancy looks sort of sad now. It's like the blue of her eyes darkens with it. She opens her mouth, then seems to change her mind, just gives up and shakes her head. "Yeah, Steve, of course. I'm sorry."

Steve's heart is twisting again, the way it did just the night before, and this time he fully understands why. It's not just that he's losing Nancy; it's that they're *both* leaving him behind, she and Jonathan. It's Steve's turn to be the friendless loner, which fills him with some sort of weak, helpless anger, as if he was being punished for letting it happen last time. Yes, all right, he *was* kind of relieved that Jonathan went away on his own—but it wasn't his responsibility, was it? It's not his *fault* Jonathan decided he wasn't wanted. And besides, why *didn't* Jonathan fight back then, anyway? Why did he just assume he had to go? Didn't Nancy yell at *him* for that?

Maybe she did. Maybe that's how they're together, now. Of course, the exact same thing is happening to Steve now—in *reverse*, Nancy said. Again, like it's his fault, like he's just letting it happen. But what else is he supposed to do? Steve can think about it all he wants, he always reaches the same conclusion. There can only be one. Jonathan won, Steve lost, and that's that.

"I'm sorry, too," Steve says back, at a loss for anything better.

Nancy gets up, taking her platter with her. “Well... have a good day.”

“You too,” he calls after her.

Being cool and mature fucking sucks.

\*

Steve can't sleep that night, so he's almost relieved to hear pebbles against his window. He gets up expecting anyone from Billy Hargrove to half a dozen faceless monsters back for blood.

Instead it's the *girl*.

The girl who just walked into the Byers' house, announcing herself by throwing a Demodog corpse through the window, and then staring at Mike Wheeler like he was the best thing since... well, since Nancy Wheeler, Steve's compelled to say. Hopper later introduced her as his daughter, which everyone just took at face value, and she'll be attending middle grade next year like it's *normal*. The good people of Hawkins are so dumb Steve can't believe anyone here ever lived past the age of twelve.

He opens the window and makes a soundless *what the fuck?* gesture at her. She looks pissed off now, standing in the middle of the lawn, staring up at him from under a dark mass of curls. He can't remember her name.

“He's lost,” she says.

“What?” Steve croaks. “Why are you even here by yourself? It's dangerous out there.”

“I know. Your friend's lost.”

“My friend?” Steve has a very bad feeling about this. “Tell me you're not talking about Jonathan.”

“He’s lost,” she repeats.

“Where?”

“In the woods.”

Steve doesn’t ask how she knows. “Fuck. Hold on, wait here.”

Sweater, pants, sneakers, and *bat*. He rushes out of his house expecting her to be gone, but she’s still there, standing on the grass in her overalls. Steve dashes past her and runs to his car.

“That way!” she calls, pointing towards the woods.

“We gotta get someone else first!” he yells over his shoulder.

The Wheelers’ house isn’t far; climbing to Nancy’s window is second nature. Steve still knows where to place his feet and hands, and he feels a pang of stupid nostalgia for simpler times, where losing his virginity and having pool parties were his biggest concerns.

Nancy’s there, sleeping on her side, clutching her pillow. He knocks on the glass and winces when she visibly startles awake.

“Steve?” She scrambles close to the window. “What the hell? If this is you trying to—”

“Please, don’t finish that sentence, and also Jonathan’s in trouble,” Steve cuts in.

“What?” She looks past him and catches sight of Hopper’s so-called daughter, standing next to the car. Apparently, that’s all the explanation she needs. “Oh, shit. Give me a minute.”

In record time, she’s out the front door, fully clothed and wielding not a nail-studded bat but a fucking *shotgun*.

“Whoa! Where did you get that?”

“It’s the one Hopper gave me,” Nancy says. “He completely forgot about it, so now it’s mine.”

“But where do you *keep* it?”

“Under my bed,” she shrugs.

“Okay,” Steve says, nodding his head in confused circles. “Okay. Moving past that. Hopper girl! We’re following you now!”

Hopper’s daughter says nothing, but leads them into the woods. Steve has never been one with nature and doesn’t intend to be, especially not in the form of worm food, so he keeps his bat at the ready. He looks over his shoulder at the slightest noise.

It only takes a few minutes for the dark trees to swallow all noise, except for distant bird calls and their own steps on the wet, spongy soil. There’s no moon tonight. Thankfully, both Steve and Nancy brought torches. They point them at the ground, just enough to watch their step.

“What happened to Jonathan?” Nancy whispers.

“I don’t know,” the Hopper girl says out loud. Thankfully for Steve’s nerves, she’s naturally quiet. “He’s hurt. He’s scared. It woke me up.”

“It woke you up?” Steve repeats. “Like, you could *hear* him?”

“In my head,” she says.

Steve decides not to comment on that. Why ask for explanations when you can live in denial?

Nancy’s never been one to live in denial, as Steve’s come to learn; but thankfully, she’s after a more important piece of information. “Why did you go to Steve first?”

“Closer,” she shrugs.

“What about Hopper?”

“Not home.”

He must be at work—on patrol, or something, Steve thinks. They keep walking into darker, more silent woods. Or maybe that’s just the

inside of Steve's head. His heart is hammering against his ribs like it's trying to get the hell out of there.

"Hey, the most dangerous thing in this forest is raccoons, now," he says to hear his own voice. "The portal's closed. *She* made sure of that."

"You weren't there," Nancy whispers. "The thing that came out of Will... It just flew away into the forest." She's gripping the shotgun tight. "What if it's got Jonathan now?"

Hopper's daughter said—*he's hurt. He's scared*. Steve can't think about it, he *can't*, so he shakes his head. "The Demodogs all died when the portal closed," he insists. "Everything's died. There's nothing left."

That's when an eerie noise floats to them from between the trees.

Nancy and Steve instinctively step close to each other, brandishing bat and gun. But the Hopper girl keeps walking. They take a moment to master their fear before Nancy clears her throat. "Jon—Jonathan?"

Only silence answers. Maybe her voice was too weak to carry. Steve tries, loud enough he wants to shush himself. "Jonathan?"

This time, there's a rustle of twigs and leaves. Then a hesitant, disbelieving rasp. "Steve?"

"Jonathan!" they both exclaim, rushing forward—then Nancy trips and almost falls into a ditch, saved by Steve's arm around her waist. It must be what happened to Jonathan; the dead leaves are dark and tightly packed, hiding the crumbling edges of a deep hole.

"Are you in there?" Steve directs his torch into the ditch; a pale hand goes up to intercept the beam, eyes squinting underneath. "Christ. Nancy, give me your scarf, I can tie it to a tree and lower myself down there, maybe..."

"I can help," the Hopper girl suddenly says.

"Oh." Steve almost asks how, then remembers his denial policy. "Okay. So, do I just...?—*Whoa!*"

Some invisible force pushes him into the ditch, but then holds him tightly enough that he can just walk down the steep wall without slipping on the wet, rotting leaves. Next to him, Nancy follows, looking too determined to be freaked out. How is she always so composed? It's one of the reasons Steve fell in love with her, really. Nancy Wheeler's tougher than iron.

Hopper's daughter deposits them both at the bottom of the ditch, which turns out to be a dried-up river bed. There are a lot of streams running through the forest, most of them only in the spring. It's much larger and deeper than anticipated; Nancy's scarf wouldn't have been long enough to go down. Jonathan is there, sitting against the damp wall, looking shaken and cold and stunned. He's so pale his eyes seem even darker than usual, blinking incredulously at them.

"How... how did you know I was here?" he says.

"We've got a psychic with us, is how." Steve looks up and waves his torch. "Hey! Hopper girl! Don't leave without us!"

"My name is Jane," comes the distant answer. He supposes that's as good as he gets.

"She said she heard you," Nancy says. "Did you call for help?"

Jonathan looks puzzled. "No."

"Why *not*?" Steve asks. He looks up again—not that he's going to see anything from the bottom of a ditch in those pitch-black woods, but his sense of orientation is back now that his terror's gone. "We're close to the back of your house, right?"

"I thought if I called for help and mom or Will heard me..." Jonathan shrugs tightly. "I didn't want to worry them. I figured I'd wait till daylight."

"You're an *idiot*," Nancy says. Then she smiles like she can't help it. "Trust issues, right?"

Jonathan smiles back a little, embarrassed. It's obviously some kind of inside joke between them, which sort of makes Steve want to die. Also, he's pretty sure Nancy wants to kiss Jonathan, and Steve may

be cool and mature but he's not prepared to let that happen right in front of him. So he moves forward instead and wraps an arm around Jonathan's shoulders. "Come on. Try to get up."

"*Shit—slowly—slowly—*" Jonathan's hands slip under Steve's jacket to hang onto his shirt, clinging to him tight with pain. He's more solid than he looks, weighing against Steve, breathing hot and fast against his neck.

It's unnerving, is what it is.

"You really are hurt!" Nancy exclaims, sounding furious about it. "You—did you break your *leg*?"

"No, I... I think it's just a sprain." Even in the dark, he looks pale enough for Steve to call him a liar. There's water soaking the bottom of the ditch; his clothes are cold and wet. He was going to sit there all night in fucking *November*.

"What happened?" Nancy insists.

"I heard something. And—you know. That mist..." He exchanges a look with Nancy, who nods anxiously. "I just wanted to have a look. If it was anything, I was going to come back and tell Mom, or call Hopper. I swear."

"We're all paranoid idiots, old news," Steve says, trying not to gasp for breath. "Hey, Hopper Jane, little help over here?"

Just like that, all three of them just start floating out of the ditch. Nancy and Steve know what to expect this time, so they reasonably keep their cool, but Jonathan panics and hangs even more tightly onto Steve—who tries to think about *anything* but his conversation with Will.

This is ridiculous. If Steve's going to be flustered by anyone here, it's Nancy. Steve remembers Nancy's sleepy smell, something warm and soft like flowers, and he tries to focus on that until he realizes he's been breathing deeper on instinct and smelling Jonathan's skin instead. Before he can stop himself, it's too late: his brain has already registered that Jonathan also smells kind of nice.



*Yeah, well, so what?* he thinks furiously as the three of them land very softly on the forest floor. Jonathan keeps clinging.

“You can let go, now,” Steve tells him with as much dignity as he can muster.

“Sorry,” Jonathan says, loosening his grip—then promptly starting to collapse when his leg gives out under him.

“Jonathan!” Nancy picks him up and Steve leans down to help. Jonathan ends up with his arms over their shoulders. He doesn’t weigh too much that way. Why is this scrawny, wiry guy so heavy?

*Must be muscle*, says a voice in Steve’s head. He glares at Hopper’s daughter just in case it’s her, but she just blinks back innocently. Her nose is bleeding.

“Can you guide us back to his house?” Nancy asks.

The girl nods silently, wipes her nose, then starts walking. The three of them follow her, Jonathan keeping silent, but breathing hard. His hand periodically clenches over Steve’s shoulder. It’s obvious he’s in tremendous pain. Thankfully, the Byers house *really* isn’t far; they actually were right out of the backyard.

And Jonathan didn’t even try calling for help because he didn’t want his family to *worry*.

“Thank you,” Nancy tells Hopper’s daughter as they slowly deposit Jonathan onto a kitchen stool. “Do you want to stay the night?”

Steve fully expects her to shake her head and say it’s fine, or maybe vanish in a puff of smoke, but instead she timidly nods. She may know the woods like a seasoned hunter and move things with her mind, but she’s also just a kid.

As if on cue, Will appears by the door, giving them all a heart attack. “Guys?” he whispers. “What’s going on?”

Several explanations, a lot of reassurance and a round of hot chocolate later, Steve ushers the kids to bed, calls Hopper to leave a message explaining where his daughter is, then hangs up and comes

back to the kitchen, only to find Jonathan arguing *against* going to the hospital.

"I can just splint it," he insists, looking paler by the minute.

"Are you a *caveman*?" Steve asks. "We're getting in your car. Now."

"He's right, Jonathan," Nancy says. "You can't leave it like this."

Jonathan blinks at them both, and Steve and Nancy do glance awkwardly at each other, because—well, they dated for a while. Breaking up doesn't erase that. They know how to function together. And unlike Jonathan, they're *popular* kids, or they used to be, which means they know how to make other people do what they want. How to gang up, how to win.

Then again, Jonathan and Nancy also share something Steve doesn't have—a taste for hardship, a willingness to face the facts and mourn properly, when he'd rather just ignore his problems as long as they're not trying to eat his face.

But sometimes denial isn't so bad. Right now, for instance. Even without the whole monster business, Jonathan probably wouldn't want to go to the hospital, because the Byers are too poor to comfortably afford a broken leg. But since everyone in the room knows it, there's no need to say it out loud.

"You know we have to go, man," Steve ends up saying.

Jonathan nods in defeat, and closes his eyes when it's time to lean onto Steve and get up again.

"I'm so stupid," he whispers.

Steve pretends he didn't hear.

The next day in class, Steve doesn't have to make himself look out the window to seem cool and aloof; in fact, he's so lost in thought he completely forgets to try and meet some friends after class. Not that he connects with a lot of people these days. He's even too late to meet up with Dustin.

So instead he heads for the hospital.

"Hey, man," he says, walking into Jonathan's room.

Jonathan's eyes go huge. "Steve—" He tries to straighten up and winces. His leg is in a cast, propped on the edge of the bed.

"Don't get up. I thought I'd come over to see how you were doing. Sign your cast, that kind of thing." Steve sits by the bed and almost pats his leg, but stops just in time. "So, did your mom find out?"

"Yeah," Jonathan winces. "That's all she needed right now—"

"If I was her, I'd be kind of relieved," Steve interrupts. "You know? It's just a broken leg. What a wonderfully simple problem to have."

Jonathan blinks, then smiles, small and strained like Will. "Right."

He still looks vaguely ill; his eyes are the only thing that looks truly alive about him. Steve wants to ask him if he's sleeping okay, if he's in pain, and even—what's *wrong* with him?—if everything's all right between him and Nancy. The thing is, Steve's pretty sure Jonathan's never had friends. And he'd obviously rather die than talk about his problems with his family. So what does that leave him with?

Jonathan ends up clearing his throat. "Steve, why... why are you here?"

It's the most confrontational question Steve's ever heard him ask. He wants to high-five him and call him champ. (Steve *definitely* spends way too much time around twelve-year-old kids.)

He also wants to explain that maybe Nancy's right, maybe they all need to get over themselves. Last night was... well, not *nice*; there was a broken leg involved, and they were in the goddamn woods. Maybe *uncomplicated* is a better word. They didn't have to worry

about whether or not everyone was on speaking terms; one of them was in trouble, so the other two helped.

Jonathan's used to being the lonely creep; isolating himself the year before—that was getting back to normal, for him. Steve needs to be around people, always has, so it's more difficult for him to accept how things are now. As it turns out, he's not very good at this cool loner thing. And the truth is, romantic entanglements aside, he feels closer to Nancy and Jonathan than he does to anyone else now. Fighting monsters together will do that to people, even people that didn't particularly like or even know each other beforehand.

But he's not physically able to articulate any of that; so instead he clears his throat and says the only other thing he could justifiably be here for. "I think you should talk to Will."

"Will?" Jonathan instantly sits up straight even though Steve knows for a *fact* it's causing him pain. "What about Will?"

"He's fine," Steve says quickly. "Just—last night when I was babysitting him, he told me about... stuff... that he might need help with."

"Steve." Jonathan grips his wrist. "I'm not kidding. You have to tell me *now*."

Steve's made a huge mistake, he's realizing it now. "No—Jesus—it's nothing like that! It's not—shadow monsters, or—or anything *bad*, it's just—"

"Tell me," Jonathan says.

"I can't! He made me promise—"

"*Tell me*," Jonathan insists with an unsettling look in his eyes, and Steve snaps.

"He's *queer*, all right? Just—freakin' let go of me!"

Jonathan does, all at once. There's something on his face Steve never saw there before, a mixture of fury and disgust.

Steve glares back, rubbing his aching wrist. “Don’t look at me like that, Byers, I’m not calling him names! *He’s* the one who told me.”

The look on Jonathan’s face slowly morphs into disbelief. His mouth opens, then closes, then opens again. “He told *you*?” he manages at last.

Steve guiltily thinks about his promise to Will—*your secret’s safe with me*—but then he decides to reject his own guilt. If Jonathan’s case is any indication, the Byers boys will literally lie wounded in a ditch rather than risk inconveniencing anyone. Maybe they need a few broken promises once in a while.

Besides, Jonathan’s tone of voice makes it clear he already knew about Will—or suspected, at the very least. The thing that surprises him most is that his little brother would open up to someone outside of the family. Another very Byers issue.

“I don’t know, we were talking about you and he just blurted it out. What can I say?” Steve points a thumb at himself. “Awesome babysitter, right here.”

Jonathan says nothing, staring at him. Slowly, but very visibly, he goes white again. Probably with pain; he’s still sitting up. Steve reaches for him, trying to slip his arm behind his back to help him maneuver himself. “Look, lie down, all right? You’re making me—”

But Jonathan violently flinches from his touch.

“Whoa. Jonathan?” On instinct, Steve raises his open hands. “What’s wrong?”

“Can you please go,” Jonathan says.

Steve blinks. “What? Why? I told you, I wasn’t—”

“Please *go*,” Jonathan articulates. He won’t look him in the eye.

Steve gets up and leaves, feeling so incredibly confused he almost walks into a nurse on his way out.

“You’re pretty silent, Harrington.” Dustin’s lisp must be a gift from God; it gives him the power to take the drama out of any given situation, so there’s no topic he won’t breach. “Girl trouble?”

“Kind of,” Steve answers.

He *is* thinking about Nancy, but he’s thinking about Jonathan, too. He wishes he wasn’t, but he can’t really help it. Why did Jonathan freak out so badly? Was it because of Will? Was he afraid Steve would tell everyone?

The guilt’s back, but Steve stubbornly wills it away again. He won’t regret bringing attention to Will Byers. Shit, the first thing that kid told Steve was *I’ll stay out of your way*. Kids that age shouldn’t be so polite and self-effacing. They should be more like—

“Yo, Steve! I’m *talking* to you here!”

Well, like Dustin Henderson.

“What?” Steve snaps.

“Do you know why 90% of the shit that happened here in Hawkins happened?” Dustin asks with the air of someone about to drop a truth bomb.

“I don’t know, because crazy scientists ripped open the fabric of the world?”

“Wrong!” Dustin exclaims, pointing at him. “*That’s* the remaining 10%, and it’s negligible. Who cares about the spark that started the fire? What *spread* it is what’s important. And do you know what spread the goddamn fire, Harrington?”

“Crazy scientists,” Steve repeats.

“Wrong again! It was *mis-com-mu-ni-ca-tion*,” Dustin enunciates, then rings his bike bell. “Boom.”

Steve stares at him in incomprehension. “Am I supposed to be enlightened about something here?”

“The first time around, we all had a piece of what was going on,” Dustin says. “Mike’s sister and Will’s brother, and Will’s mom and Chief Hopper, and me and Mike and Lucas and... well, maybe not you, actually. You didn’t know shit.”

“Hey,” Steve protests.

“It’s okay, you more than made up for your late start,” Dustin says, actually patting him on the arm. “Anyway, what I’m trying to say here is that if we’d come together earlier—”

“Yeah, do get to the bottom line.”

“What I’m *trying* to say here,” Dustin repeats, undeterred, “is that you should talk to Nancy.”

Steve’s jaw drops. “Are you giving *me* relationship advice?”

“Low blow, Harrington,” Dustin says, swerving his front wheel threateningly. “Look. I may be just a little tadpole in the great mysterious pond of romance, but I do know this: when people don’t talk to each other, good people end up eaten. Or worse.” Then the serious look slips off his face. “By the way, Will’s mom wants you to babysit him again tonight, okay? Thanks, bye.”

“*What?*” Steve shouts after him, but Dustin’s already zipped away on his bike, standing on the pedals like he’s at the Tour de France.

\*

“Hey, Steve,” Will says with a timid smile.

“Hello, William,” Steve sighs, looking away while he ruffles the kid’s hair.

Joyce is there, apologizing profusely and explaining Jonathan is at the hospital, which Steve of course already knows, so he should have definitely seen this coming. He makes the appropriate noises of surprise and concern, then he looks past her and his mouth falls open.

Behind Will, sitting cross-legged in a circle in the living room, are Dustin and Lucas and Mike and Max and even the Hopper Girl. (Jane?)

Joyce catches on Steve's outraged look and wilts. "Didn't Dustin tell you? Will's friends are having a sleepover..."

"Of course he told me," Steve says through grinding teeth. "It's no problem at all, Mrs Byers."

Joyce probably sees right through him, but doesn't insist and hugs her son goodbye before leaving. Steve stands there glaring at Dustin, who has the gall to smile with his entire face from across the room. "Hey, Steve!"

"Miscommunication, huh?" Steve asks darkly.

"Who knows, maybe you *will* get eaten," Dustin says, tapping at a huge book in the middle of their little circle.

"No." Steve takes a step back and raises a finger. "No way. I am *not* playing Dungeons and Dragons with a bunch of twelve-years-olds."

"I'm *thirteen!*" Max says, while the others exclaim "Almost thirteen!" or "Twelve and a half!" like that's even the *point*. Steve pinches the bridge of his nose and wonders how he ended up here. But every time part of him misses the King Steve days, Billy Hargrove rises like an asshole shadow, spreading his arms. *You sad you're not like me anymore?*

Steve has no desire to be Billy Hargrove. He sits on the floor with a sigh and waves a defeated hand.

"Okay, so how does this work? Do I pick a character, or what?"

"We made one for you," Mike says, grandly handing him a sheet



covered in stats Steve can't even decipher. "And your name will be..."

Dustin obligingly drumrolls on the hardcover.

"Gorgonslayer!" Lucas announces.

Steve blinks. It's ridiculous, of course, but not ridiculous in the way he expected. "Guess that's better than Farrah Fawcett."

"Why would we call you Farrah Fawcett?" Max asks, frowning.

Steve feels another pang of stupid guilt. Dustin kept his unimportant secret, while Steve couldn't sit on Will's for longer than two days.

"All right! All right," he says. "So what now?"

\*

It's very, very late when Steve Gorgonslayer, Will the Wise, Sir Lucas of Hawkins, Dwarven Dustin, Eleven Witches and Mad Max finally arrive at the Caverns of Draconis, but Steve has never been more pumped up.

"I brandish the amulet!" he yells. "Do I need to roll for that?"

"No, but Draconis does," Mike says, rolling a dice. It's a 20. "Oh, shit. The dragon's tails whips through the air and sends the amulet flying out of your hand."

"No!" the kids all shout, and Dustin even slaps Steve's shoulder. "Dammit, Steve!"

"Well, someone get it back!" Steve protests. "Whose turn is it?"

"Mine," Jane says timidly.

"Use your powers! Stop it in mid-air!" Max exclaims.

Jane smiles at her, but Mike sighs. "For the last time, El does *not* have telekinetic powers in the game."

"Why not?" Lucas protests. "That's like saying I can't walk in the game, even though I can in real life!"

"You *can't* walk in the game," Dustin points out.

"That's because I'm wounded! It's different!"

"All right, all right," Steve says, waving both hands. "We have to cut this out, anyway. It's almost midnight. Don't whine at me, you dickheads, I'm not your parents!" he says against the chorus of protests. "I was your age like five years ago, I already know any excuse you can come up with, it won't work on me!"

It's another twenty minutes before the kids are ready to go to bed, brushing their teeth in a mess of colliding elbows and taking turns in the bathroom to change into their pajamas. Steve almost makes Max and Jane sleep in a separate room from the boys, then mentally calls himself an idiot and lets them all pile up in the living room. Why shouldn't they be all together? They've earned it. They're a team.

God, it really is late, and the kids are still bouncing off the walls with the excitement of the game, chatting and giggling from one bedspread to another. Maybe he should have watched the time better. But Joyce came back at 1am the last time around, Steve thinks, trying to reassure himself. There's a good chance they'll be asleep by the time her car parks in the driveway.

It's a Friday night, anyway.

"Will you come back so we can finish the campaign?" Dustin asks just as Steve's about to leave the room.

Steve's brought up short. "Uh... yeah, I guess." He runs a hand through his hair and grins. "Can't see how you'll win this one without me."

"You know, Nancy used to play with us," Mike says sleepily. "She dressed up as an elf, once."

“What?” Steve says, laughing. “Tell me you took pictures.”

“My mom did, probably, but good luck finding them.”

Steve shakes his head and hits the light, plunging the room in near darkness. He'll be watching TV with the kitchen lights on. So the kids don't get scared.

\*

Of course, he doesn't hear Will coming.

“Jesus!” he says, startled from his half-doze. “We need to put a bell on you, William.”

“Sorry,” Will says quietly. “I'm thirsty.”

Steve sinks back in his chair. “Well, help yourself.”

The TV's still on, buzzing too quietly for him to make out actual words. Steve realizes he was falling asleep and casts a look at the clock on the wall: almost one. Joyce Byers should be here any minute now.

Will drinks his glass of water, sitting at the table. Steve's drumming on the oilcloth.

“Hey,” he says at last. “There's something I should probably tell you, bud.”

He feels more shitty than ever when Will looks at him with those huge, wary eyes. They're the same color as his brother's, but Jonathan's eyes are different, almost slanted, like a fox. Steve shakes him out of his head and clears his throat. “You know, uh... that thing we talked about last time?”

Will gives a small nod. He looks petrified again. And fuck, Steve can't tell this sweet kid what an idiot he's been, so he tells a half-truth

instead. "I visited Jonathan in the hospital, and I'm pretty sure he already knows."

Will swallows, but doesn't burst into tears. That's probably a win.

"You should tell him," Steve says very gently. "I'm sure he'll be happy you did."

Will nods, looking down. Then he looks back up. "Why'd you visit him?"

"Why?" Steve repeats, nonplussed. "Why not? I was the one who found him in the woods, remember?"

"That's rescuing him," Will says. "You had to do it. You didn't *have* to visit him in the hospital."

Steve's stumped. "Well, he's... he's my friend."

Then he thinks back to the way Jonathan flinched from him in the hospital. He wouldn't look him in the eye. Will acts the same way when he's scared, making himself smaller, hoping to vanish. The way Jonathan vanished, after Steve got back with Nancy.

Steve feels like he's on the brink of something. And denial doesn't work out so well for him these days.

He lowers his voice until he can barely hear himself. "Hey, what... what made you so sure he liked me?"

Will stares at him.

"I mean—everyone knew he liked Nancy," Steve explains quickly. "I told you, he kept taking pictures of—"

And that's when it hits him.

"Wait. *Wait*. Did he take pictures of *me*, too?"

Will turns very white. Steve suddenly realizes he's asking him to betray his big brother, and urgently backpedals. "Shit. Shit. I'm sorry. You don't have to say anything."

“Don’t...” Will’s voice is tremulous. “Don’t be mean to him.”

Oh God, Steve ended up making him cry after all. “No, bud, no, I promise. I swear.” He looks Will in the eye and repeats, “He’s my *friend*, okay? I mean that. I’m just...” He thinks back to what Dustin said. “I guess I’m trying to put all the pieces together.”

Just then, Joyce Byers’ headlights flash through the window, peeling across the opposite wall. The both of them jump to their feet.

“Shit,” Steve whispers, ushering Will out of the room. “Go back to bed, pretend to sleep. And—” he stops him for a second. “I’m serious. Don’t worry about Jonathan. Think about yourself, for once.”

Will gives him a pale smile, which Steve takes the time to return before he shoos him away. “She’s there! Go, go, go!”

Once again, he manages to duck Joyce’s attempts to pay him and hurries out into the freezing night. His head is so full of questions, Hopper’s kid can probably hear half of them.

\*

The next morning is a Saturday. Steve sleeps like a log until noon. When he wakes up, he rolls on his back and reaches down into his underwear on autopilot.

He still jerks off to Nancy, and he doesn’t even feel guilty about it, thank you very much. That’s the privacy of his own head; it’s not hurting anyone. Most of the images he sees are memories, anyway.

He remembers Nancy’s first time. She was so nervous she wanted to just do it, get it out of the way, and Steve had to get her to listen, explain what he wanted to do first. It made her adorably wrinkle her nose, but of course she said yes, because she was a virgin and too defiant to admit it.

Bottom line, she let Steve put his mouth on her, and she *loved* it.

Opened up like a flower, and that's what Steve's thinking about now, how she so clearly, so deeply *loved* it...

Then, annoyingly, he wonders if Jonathan does that for her now. Does he even know how to do it? Is he even aware people do that? While Steve has Nance's virginity, he's pretty sure she took Jonathan's. So maybe she had to *teach* him how to do it. Maybe it was his turn to be nervous, and maybe she just held his head down until he finally got to work—

Steve suddenly opens his eyes and frowns at the ceiling when he realizes he's still moving his hand. Intruding thoughts ruining his personal time aren't uncommon, but he usually doesn't *keep* jerking off to them.

He closes his eyes again, but the same scene reappears. Jonathan and Nancy. But this time he wonders about Jonathan, who's dealt with a lot of adult stuff at a very early age, who has this odd mesmerizing way of looking at people. Maybe he instinctively knew how to please Nancy. Maybe he was a natural. Maybe she was amazed and overwhelmed, maybe she told him she had never felt like this before —

Now *that* line of thinking sucks.

Steve goes back to the previous one, which is much better for his ego. A fumbling Jonathan is nothing to be jealous of. And Nancy's also better as the competent, determined girl she actually *is*, rather than a swooning, fawning caricature. Yeah, of course Nancy would take charge. Jonathan would timidly follow, obeying her instructions, maybe getting a bit braver with approval. Steve can just about see him, with his head between Nancy's thighs, doing the best he can. It's like Steve's actually there in the room, watching. And what would Jonathan think of *that*? It would stress him out, he'd be ashamed, but maybe it'd also turn him on, maybe he'd be hoping to be praised, just like when Steve told him *good grip*—

Steve whips his hand out of his underwear, furious at himself, then gets up and marches out of his bed. It's mid-November but he's going to be taking a cold shower all the same.

\*

It's late afternoon and he's vaguely considering homework when the doorbell rings.

"Steve, honey, can you get that?" his mom yells.

"I'm doing my homework!" Steve shouts back.

"Are you?"

The doorbell rings again. Steve throws his hands in the air then jogs down the stairs. "If I can't focus enough to finish my math, I'm telling Mr. Mosby it was *your* f..."

It's *Nancy*.

And she's on the brink of tears. And she's also visibly seething with rage.

"Uh," Steve says unintelligently, his hand still on the doorknob. "Hi?"

Nancy hits him in the shoulder with the flat of her palm. Then she does it again, and then again and again like she's having a slap fight with his whole upper body. It doesn't exactly hurt, but her jaw is set and her eyes are murderous and she still looks like she's about to cry.

"Nance, *Nance*," Steve says eventually, catching her wrists. "Whoa, Nancy!"

"Who is it?" Steve's mother calls from inside the house.

"I'm going out!" Steve calls, then slams the door before she can object.

Nancy follows him to his car in angry silence, plonks herself in the passenger seat and crosses her arms and legs so tightly Steve's a bit afraid she'll get stuck. He starts the car, backs out of the driveway, and drives around for five minutes before parking on the side of the road.

He cuts the engine, then turns to her. "What was that all about?"

"You went to see Jonathan in the hospital," Nancy says, glaring a hole through the windshield.

Steve blinks. "Yes?"

"And *then* Jonathan broke up with me."

"He *what*?"

"So I don't know what you said to him," Nancy says, fury and tears bubbling in her voice, "but you're going to go back there and take it all back, or so *fucking* help me—"

"Nancy!" Steve almost yells. "My God! Nancy! Can we please talk about this like reasonable adults! I don't want you and Jonathan to break up! I don't want you back!"

She looks at him, tears on her face and anger in her eyes.

"I... I do want you back," Steve amends, because it's the painful, miserable truth. "But I'm not that kind of asshole. Please, Nancy, I need you to believe at least *that*."

Shit, why is everyone so ready to assume the worst from him? Steve is really starting to question how much of a dick he was in his golden years. Nancy's silent for a long time. When she speaks up, her voice is wet and raw.

"You're right." She wipes her eyes. "You're right. Sorry. I believe you."

"*Thank* you," Steve says with unmitigated relief.

Nancy's still agitated. "Look, it's just—Jonathan has always been so... so unsure about everything. People have told him all his life he wasn't in anybody's league. And I think maybe he still feels guilty about those pictures from last year." She takes a deep, bracing breath. "So did you tell him anything that might have freaked him out? Even accidentally?"



Steve really, really wishes he had no idea what it could be. He also wishes he was better at hiding what he thinks, especially from Nancy who always seems to see right through him.

“Tell me,” she asks. “If you know how to fix this, tell me.” Her anger’s gone, now, but she wants to *understand*.

Steve thinks about miscommunication and spreading fires. He thinks maybe Jonathan’s been on fire for a while, and now it’s spread to Steve, and to Nancy, and now they’re all burning and miserable.

He clears his throat. “Look, I’m gonna tell you. But first, just... remember I’m serious, here. This isn’t me trying to make him look... bad, or anything like—”

“What,” she says flatly. “Jonathan feels like he can’t live up to you, is that it?”

“Um, no, that’s not what I had in mind—but who knows?” Steve says, opening his hands and widening his eyes in a *could be!* face.

Nancy looks unimpressed. Steve deflates.

“No. All right.” Annoyance tries to sting him. Why is he trying to fix his ex-girlfriend’s relationship? Then he remembers telling Will *he’s my friend*. He remembers sitting by Jonathan’s bed and thinking they’re *both* his friends. And then he remembers something else, something Nancy said.

Of course she had it first. Nancy always was the clever one.

“Remember what you told me? About how you wish you didn’t have to choose?”

She frowns. “Yes...?”

“Yeah, that.” He runs a hand through his hair. “How, um... how literally did you mean that?”

Nancy stares.

Steve clears his throat. “Because there’s a slight chance. That

Jonathan. Also wishes that. Um. That he didn't have to choose." He coughs. "I think maybe he's been, uh. Into me? For a while. But not just me. Into you, too, obviously. Into both of us. Is what I mean."

Nancy *keeps* staring.

"And he realized I was going to figure it out." Steve clears his throat. "That's probably why he decided to... to cut his losses. He's scared of what you'll think. What we'll both think."

He waits for some kind of explosion. But Nancy Wheeler is frightfully intelligent and pretty down-to-earth. Her eyes just go a little wider; and just like that, she accepts the truth Steve's been struggling with for a week.

"Holy shit," she whispers.

The fact that it makes *sense* to her really rattles Steve. Until then, there was still the possibility that he was just making things up because Will Byers had thrown him off-balance. Also, he's not sure, but he thinks Nancy just admitted by omission that she does still like Steve. That she does like them *both*.

*You keep making me choose.*

Now Nancy's frowning at him. "Wait, and you're *okay* with that?"

Steve blinks, stopped short in his epiphany. "Okay with what?"

"With *Jonathan*," Nancy says incredulously. "Steve, just a year ago, you were strolling around the school calling everyone you didn't like a faggot—"

"I wasn't that bad!" he protests against all evidence. "And—everyone did that! But I wasn't—I use Farah Fawcett hair products, it's not like I'm in a position to throw stones! And Jonathan doesn't deserve—Jonathan's *all right*," he says. "People have always been talking shit about him, but things have never been easy for him and he's always done the best he could and he's... he's all right."

Despite the fact that his argument makes no sense at all, Nancy looks like she's had a revelation too. "Do you like him *back*?"

“Who *cares if I do!*” Steve finally explodes.

Nancy blinks at him, but Steve’s on a roll now.

“Why does anyone still care about that kind of thing? We fought goddamn faceless monsters from another world for the second time in two years! We’re all supposed to be cool and mature now! Everything else should be meaningless next to the shit we went through! Do I still like you? Of course! Do I also like Jonathan? Maybe! I don’t *not* like him! Look, if you really want to know, when I try to imagine it, I just kind of go ‘why not!’ I’ve always been kind of ‘why not’ about everyone! But I never really needed to think about that stuff! I liked who I was supposed to like, that was enough!”

He stops, catching his breath. Nancy’s looking at him with round eyes. Steve had no idea he even believed all of that, but now that he’s heard himself, he knows it’s the truth.

When he really thinks about it, he doesn’t *understand* why there’s a difference. Boys and girls all have a mouth to kiss. They all enjoy a hand down their pants, and they all have the ability to stick their hand down Steve’s. So what is the big *deal*? If that makes him queer, then it really doesn’t take much, does it?

But the big deal, of course, is that high school is a goddamn warzone, the way few adults truly remember. So yeah, those thoughts never rose to the surface. Steve’s *good* at denial. Here’s another thing Jonathan managed to face while Steve rather wouldn’t. No wonder Nancy picked him in the end...

Of course, that’s when Nancy kisses him.

Steve’s poor mangled heart stops dead. After a second of shock, he closes his eyes and just desperately enjoys this moment, the smell of her, the feel of her hair, and how deceptively frail she feels when he finally thinks of drawing a hand up her back.

It feels like a reunion kiss. It feels like a breath of fresh air after two weeks of cloying smoke. When she pulls back, she’s looking right at him with her huge, darkening blue eyes, serious and focused, like she’s thinking something over.

“Nance,” Steve croaks. He feels like someone took all the nails out of his bat then whacked him over the head with it. “I’m... I’m very confused.”

She takes his hand and says, “Look. Here’s the plan.”

\*

Visiting hours have been over for a while, but sneaking into buildings is one skill they did solidly acquire after that whole monster shitshow. A hospital is way easier than a secret government lab hiding a door to the upside down.

Jonathan is set to be released in the morning, so he’s not plugged into anything. He’s asleep, in his own clothes, and his room is quiet and dark.

Steve quietly closes the door while Nancy whispers, “Jonathan?”

His brow is furrowed, even in his sleep. His fingertips twitch, his eyes move behind closed lids. Of course Jonathan has nightmares. With everything that happened to him and his family, it’s a wonder he can even function. And maybe he can’t even function, because chasing Steve away was one thing, but breaking up with Nancy? That’s just crazy.

Nancy calls his name again, then touches his arm.

Jonathan flinches. “N... Nancy?”

“Hi.” She sits by his side. Steve goes to sit on the other side, trying not to spook him, but Jonathan sees him anyway so Steve gives up on stealth and turns on the lamp by the bed.

“Steve?” Jonathan sits up, looking more awake by the second. And scared. He always looks scared. “What’s going on?”

Nancy and Steve look at each other over the bed, and Steve feels it

again—the kinship between them, their ability to play it like a team. It’s even easier now that Steve’s finally gotten his head out of his ass. After that awful party, he asked Nancy to tell him she loved him, and she couldn’t. Of course she couldn’t; she wanted to fight for Barb, she wanted to do *something*, and Steve wanted to do exactly nothing. So of course she went to Jonathan. *You made me choose.*

But why did it have to be all or nothing? Why did it mean breaking up with one and dating the other? Jonathan left after she picked Steve, and Steve was going to leave after she picked Jonathan. They made her choose, both times. Steve or Jonathan. All or nothing.

Nancy’s right.

It’s all *bullshit*.

Steve looks at Jonathan and still doesn’t think he’s handsome, not exactly. But he sees his thin black t-shirt, his wiry frame, his hair falling in his eyes, the tension and worry he always carries within him. He sees those eyes, dark and almost slanted, piercing like a fox’s, and he can’t look away. He wants to breathe him in again, like he did in the woods. So maybe Will Byers really *is* too perceptive for his own good. Screw all these kids anyway, this is adult stuff.

Steve takes a deep breath, because now’s the scary part. But he’s the Gorgonslayer—right? He meets Nancy’s eyes for support, for confirmation, before turning to Jonathan again.

“I’m going to do something,” he says. “If it’s the wrong move, just... punch me, or whatever.”

Jonathan doesn’t answer. He doesn’t move either, petrified even as Steve wraps a hand behind his neck, pulls him in, and kisses him.

Oh, this feels strange, for all of Steve’s speech about not caring earlier. He’s kissing Jonathan Byers. *Jonathan Byers*, the creepy kid, the weirdo, the loner. In front of *Nancy Wheeler*, no less. Only two years ago, this would have been unthinkable.

Steve’s mind is running at full speed even as the kiss lingers. So, what? Are they seriously all going to be dating each other at the

same time? Is that really what Nancy wants, what Jonathan maybe wants, what Steve might want, too? Is that why they all mean when they say they shouldn't have to choose? It's absurd, is what it is. Completely, utterly absurd.

But it's also *normal*. Just like Steve told Will. A weird kind of normal, maybe, but nothing that's out of this world. Nothing monstrous. Nothing inhuman.

When Steve pulls back, his heart is beating too fast. But he smiles. He likes that he's changed enough to do this. He likes Jonathan, and he likes Nancy, the both of them who knocked off his jerkwad crown.

Jonathan looks like he's in shock.

Steve looks past his shoulder to meet Nancy's eyes again, urging her without words. *Little help over here?* She's also staring wide-eyed—huh, that's interesting—but quickly snaps out of it and shyly takes Jonathan's hand.

Jonathan startles so violently he jerks his leg and scowls in pain. They both exclaim and instinctively reach for him, but he raises his free hand to stop them and takes a few deep breaths, eyes clenched shut. They give him some space, trading slightly panicked looks.

Finally, he reopens his eyes and blinks warily at them.

"Is this—some kind of—" he can't even string his sentence together. "Is this like—a prank?"

Steve, who was holding his breath, exhales all at once. "Sure, yeah. We broke into this hospital outside visiting hours to gay-chicken you while you're lying there with a broken leg."

"Steve," Nancy says with a frown.

"What? Cut me some slack! This is big for me too. I'm having a sexual crisis, and whatnot."

"Guys," Jonathan says pleadingly. He keeps stealing glances between the two of them. "I just... I don't understand."

"Well, did we get it right? Do you like both of us?" Steve asks, pointing between them. "Is that why you've been freaking out?"

Jonathan opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

"If you don't actually like Steve, for the record, that's fine," Nancy says.

"Why wouldn't he?" Steve protests gamely. "I'm very loveable. Now, if you don't like *Nancy*..."

"Shut up, Steve." She swallows. "But, Jonathan, if you *don't*—then... it's fine. It's fine too. But we're *friends*. Okay?" She sounds a little desperate. "The three of us."

*The three of us*, Steve thinks, and feels something unclench in his chest. Yeah. That, right there. That sounds about right.

Nancy's still going. "Just don't push us away like that. We're going to stand by you, all right? I'm sick of this whole third-wheel rule. I'm sick of always losing one of you just so I can *talk* to the other. It's so stupid! There's no reason we should all hang out together only in case of monsters—"

"Or broken legs," Steve says helpfully.

"Or broken legs—"

Jonathan tries to speak, but his voice breaks.

"Oh no." Nancy freezes. "No, Jonathan, that's not what we—"

"I'm fine," he says with a strangled laugh. His tears roll down. "I just... I'm sorry, I just..."

Steve acts on instinct, just leans forward to hold him, and Nancy does the same, coming from the back. Their fingers entwine over Jonathan's shoulder.

Jonathan doesn't try to pull back, just lets out a gasp of raw, unspeakable relief. He shakes in their arms like something's being wrung from him, like when they found him in the forest, when he

was convinced no one would come for him. But they came. They just had to figure their shit out. They hold him tight and he holds them tighter, and Nancy's cheeks are wet with tears too, but she gives Steve a lopsided smile over Jonathan's back. Steve mouths *high five later*, which makes her roll her eyes and *ha*, she *loves* him. She still loves him. Steve freakin' *knew* it. As for him, he's not crying at all, thank you very much. He's too cool and mature for that.

The hug lasts a long time, not that anybody minds. They really, really earned that one.

\*

Jonathan's released from the hospital the following morning; and that very same afternoon, Nancy and Steve show up at the Byers' house.

"Nancy!" Joyce Byers exclaims when she opens the door. Then she opens it further and looks disconcerted. "And—Steve?"

"Hi, Mrs Byers," Nancy says brightly, radiating gold-star student vibes. "We're here to see Jonathan."

"We've brought him flowers!" Steve says, holding up his bouquet.

He can also charm parents when he puts his mind to it, and Joyce seems a little blindsided by their combined powers, enough not to ask why the hell Nancy's brought her ex along to see her boyfriend.

"Well... well, come in," she says, stepping back.

They slip inside the house and wait patiently while she goes to Jonathan's room to announce them. Steve catches sight of Will in the kitchen, drawing. He looks up and blinks in confusion at Steve. Steve waves his bouquet at him and winks. Let him do with that what he will.

Jonathan's sitting by his desk in a wheelchair. He looks a bit intimidated to see them, but he smiles that tiny crooked Byers smile,



which makes his eyes slant a bit more. Nancy smiles back and Steve does too. Joyce closes the door behind them, and they're alone.

Steve hands him the flowers.

"Thanks," Jonathan says automatically. He crinkles the paper in his hands for a moment.

Steve sits on the bed and exhales loudly. "Wow, Byers, your room brings back memories. Seems like yesterday I was beating up a monster in the hallway."

Jonathan laughs.

"I'm kissing you," Nancy suddenly announces, like she can't stand it anymore.

She walks across the room, takes Jonathan's face in her hands and kisses him. Jonathan visibly melts, and Steve... well, Steve can't *blame* him. Being kissed by Nancy Wheeler is pretty fucking great.

When she straightens up, Nancy looks at him questioningly. Jonathan already seems worried, but Steve smiles and opens his hands. "I'm not even jealous!"

Jonathan snorts. Steve grins, because it's true, which is a surprise. He thought he'd have to grit his teeth more, but it's so easy to watch them do this, now that he knows he won't be left behind. Nancy gives him that half-smile he loves, and Steve's heart swells in answer.

Jonathan's smiling but still looks kind of unsure, so Steve gets up and crosses the room to go lean in front of him, bracing on his wheelchair to get at eye level. "Relax. I don't mind you, Byers."

Then he kisses him. It's their second kiss and Steve's heart forgets again how to beat regularly. *Jonathan freakin' Byers*. On instinct, he makes the kiss deeper, more languid, like he would with a girl, and Jonathan *shivers* against him like it's physically too much.

Steve breaks the kiss with a gasp and wipes his mouth. "Okay, wow."

"Sorry," Jonathan breathes.

“Sorry, why? Don’t apologize to me. It’s just the sexual crisis talking again.” Steve runs both hands through his hair. “God, I’m a fucking queer.”

Jonathan laughs under his breath. Nancy’s smiling that smile again, biting her lower lip. *She’s* not jealous either, for sure. For a while they just stay there, looking happily at each other.

Then Jonathan clears his throat; he’s always the first to worry. “So, how... how is this going to work?”

“For now, it’s not,” Steve says, eyeing his cast critically. “Hell of a time to be on bed rest, man. We can discuss positions some other day.”

Nancy swats at him with the bouquet, making him cackle. Jonathan’s cheeks have colored a little. “That’s not...” he says, then coughs again. “I’m just talking about... everything. In general. The three of us.”

“The three of us,” Steve grins. “You know, I really like the sound of that. The Hawkins Three.” He shrugs. “Mostly we’ll be giving Nancy a goddamn break, buddy. As for the specifics...”

Nancy takes Jonathan’s hand. “It’s like monster hunting. I guess we’ll just make it up as we go.” She smiles at him. “As usual.”

Steve leans in to steal a kiss from Nancy, which she happily gives, still smiling. He still can’t believe that’s real, that he’s figured it out, that he’s got her back. Both of them. When he takes Jonathan’s other hand, he’s still grinning; he can’t remember ever being this happy before.

“Worked out pretty well so far,” he says.

\*

It’s a week later before they’re all together again outside of school,

holed up in Jonathan's room. Will is at the Wheelers' for another sleepover (Steve wonders if they'll finish the D&D campaign without him, and surprises himself by hoping they don't) and Joyce Byers is—well, actually, he has no idea where she is. Probably at work, as always.

Officially, the three of them are doing homework. Unofficially... well, no, that's actually what Nancy and Jonathan are doing. On a Friday night. They're both such *nerds*.

"It's like that time I helped you for your test," Steve says, lying on the bed, his textbook pointedly face-down on the floor. "Right, Nance?"

"No, it's not," she says from where she's sitting at the desk, but she can't help smiling at him, her tight-lipped smile curling adorably at one end.

Jonathan looks up, puzzled. "I feel like I'm missing something."

"You are." Steve walks across the bed on all fours and drags Jonathan's wheelchair backwards by the handles. "It went something like this..." He rests his chin on Jonathan's shoulder, under the pretense of reading the textbook in his lap. "Every time you give a right answer, I'll kiss you. How's that sound?"

"Steve," Nancy says.

"What?" Steve grins. "Jonathan doesn't mind."

"Don't let him push you around," Nancy tells Jonathan seriously.

Jonathan slightly shakes his head with a smile. He's been smiling more this week than in all the years Steve's known him. He can't quite meet Steve's eyes—Nancy's right, he's painfully shy—but he says, "Okay, so ask me a question."

"Ohh, ready player one!" Steve settles his chin more comfortably on the crook of Jonathan's shoulder. "Nancy, you can play, too. Come here, bring your chair." Incredibly, she does, dragging it in front of Jonathan, close enough that Steve could reach out and touch her, if he wanted. "Both of you, close your eyes. Okay." He peers at the textbook. "Battle of Gettysburg?"

“1863,” Jonathan says at once. “July 1<sup>st</sup>.”

Steve gives him a loud smack on the cheek. “Correct.”

They’re both smiling, especially Nancy who’s visibly trying to keep a straight face, eyes closed. Steve reads another question. “How long did the battle last?”

“Is it three days?” Nancy asks.

“Why, Nance, it *is*.” Bracing on Jonathan’s chair, Steve leans over his shoulder to kiss her on the mouth. She smiles and doesn’t open her eyes.

Steve doesn’t put his chin back where it was; instead he leans to see the textbook again. “What, uh... what state did the battle begin in?”

“Pennsylvania,” Jonathan murmurs.

Steve cups his jaw to turn his head, and kisses him. It’s a real kiss, a goddamn movie kiss with tongue. Jonathan kisses back, without a sound, and it lasts a bit longer than it should. Steve pulls back and realizes that Nancy’s opened her eyes, watching them. Jonathan opens his eyes too, a bit flustered.

“Ask another question,” Nancy says without looking away.

Steve knows that look in her eyes. And she knows he knows. They understand each other.

He raises his eyebrows, then says, “Nickname of the Union?”

Nancy doesn’t answer, just waits for Jonathan to speak. He blinks at that, but then says hesitantly, “Yankees?”

This time it’s her who kisses him. Steve puts his hands on Jonathan’s shoulders and squeezes.

“Who wrote the Gettysburg address?”

“Uh,” Jonathan says, actually breaking the kiss to answer. “A-Abraham Lincoln.”

“You know, I think you guys don’t need to study anymore,” Steve says. His right hand’s sliding down Jonathan’s side, coming back up under the hem of his shirt. “You already know everything.”

“You’ve been asking really easy questions,” Jonathan protests weakly.

Nancy kisses him again. Steve closes his eyes and focuses on what he can feel. Jonathan’s torso is slightly pockmarked, maybe, but dense with wiry muscle. His stomach flutters when Steve’s hand roams further down.

Jonathan suddenly twitches, and Steve reopens his eyes to realize Nancy’s got her hands on his thighs, squeezing, going further up. They have him cornered.

When she pulls back from the kiss, Steve briefly meets her eyes; she’s a little flushed, and Steve’s more flustered than he thought, too. He didn’t think this would arouse him so much, but then again, he did almost masturbate to it once.

On instinct, he looks out the window, but there’s nobody there. It’s fine. They’re fine.

“Okay, Jonathan?” he says under his breath, running a hand through Jonathan’s hair.

“Uh,” Jonathan manages. He obviously doesn’t know what to do with himself, with his hands, with the both of them.

Steve’s still kneeling up on the bed, behind the wheelchair. He holds onto it with one hand so Jonathan won’t roll away—not that he’d go far, since Nancy’s sitting right in front of him, their knees touching. With his other hand, Steve tilts Jonathan’s head back and kisses him again. Jonathan’s barely breathing, and suddenly *flinches* because the textbook’s gone from his lap and Nancy’s got her hand between his thighs, rubbing, squeezing. Steve’s pants are so tight all of a sudden, it’s like she’s touching him too.

Jonathan’s neck is still arched back, and he’s holding onto his armrests for dear life. Nancy looks up at Steve, holds his gaze for a burning second, then says quietly, “Jonathan.”

Steve lets him tilt his head forward again so he can look at her. He can't speak, breathing fast and shallow.

"Who won the Civil War?" she asks.

If he wants to get out of this, all Jonathan has to do is give the wrong answer. He works to catch his breath.

"The... " He swallows thickly. "The... the... Union."

Nancy kisses him, kisses him *deep*, and Steve reaches down to open Jonathan's pants.

It really feels like it should bother him more, but it's just a dick. He's got one of those, he's touched it plenty of times. He pulls it out, making Jonathan arch in his wheelchair; then he tightens his grip and starts moving his hand. Nancy joins in, twisting and teasing the head; it's the goddamn *dirtiest* thing Steve's ever done and it's riling him up like crazy. With his free hand, he opens his own pants, unsure whether he'll manage to stay focused on Jonathan and also get himself off. Glancing up, he sees that Nancy, still kissing Jonathan, also popped the button of her jeans. Another thing Steve loves about Nancy Wheeler; she's a quick learner. And she's in touch with herself.

When Nancy pulls back from the kiss, it's Steve who leans in to kiss Jonathan again, open-mouthed, messy. They're still jerking him off, double-teaming him, and Jonathan's squirming in his chair, moaning in Steve's mouth, gasping for air when he can. Steve gives up on touching himself for now, focuses on doing Jonathan, going faster, a bit rougher, brings his free hand under Jonathan's shirt again, rucks it up to drag his nails over his skin, and all of a sudden that's what does it—Jonathan shakes apart over both their hands with a broken gasp.

When he's done, sitting there, panting, Steve lets go and promptly takes care of himself, right there on the bed behind Jonathan's chair. He finishes in five seconds flat, trying to contain the mess in his hand. Nancy's right behind—at least he thinks so; in any case, her hand stops moving and she falls limp in her chair with a deep exhale.

Jonathan's eyes are still closed; his breath shakes on the way out. In

fact, his whole body's shaking, very slightly.

Steve puts his chin on his shoulder again. "Hey, Byers," he says gently.

Nancy straightens up, pushes her hair out of her eyes, then leans closer too. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Jonathan murmurs hoarsely.

"Looks like we managed after all, huh?" Steve says, still a bit dazed himself, but prone to post-orgasmic smugness. "Even with that leg." His hand's sticky, first from Jonathan and then from himself. "Hey, man, you have Kleenex somewhere?"

Jonathan's eyes are still closed. He looks overwhelmed. "You guys don't get..."

They wait for him to talk, on the edge of worry.

"I've been watching the both of you for *years*," Jonathan breathes at last. "I'm sorry, I know that's creepy. It's just—I can't believe this is happening. All of this. I keep thinking I'm going to—wake up, or something. It feels like none of this should be happening. To me. Sorry."

Steve meets Nancy's eyes. She's smiling. They lace fingers around Jonathan's hand, with Nancy on top and Steve coming up from underneath, squeezing them both.

"Well, Jonathan," Steve says. "Stranger things have happened."

Jonathan laughs wetly and squeezes their hands in return.

\*

It's a beautiful, cold morning, and Steve's hair looks fantastic if he does say so himself. Dustin's already told him so, too, which doesn't

hurt. He's also informed Steve that Joyce Byers was not, in fact, at work three nights ago, but having coffee with Hopper—which is something Jane-El just *saw* while trying to figure out if she'd left her walkie-talkie at home. That's interesting, Steve says, but maybe Hopper's just being a friend; Bob died too recently. Everyone's having girl troubles in this goddamn town, Dustin concludes.

A few birds are chasing each other in the sky. Steve's pretty sure he's going to ace his history test.

"So, Will told us he was queer," Dustin says out of the blue.

Steve looks at him in surprise. "Should... should you be telling me that?"

"He told us you already knew, obviously. And why the fuck did *you* know before everyone else?"

"Language," Steve says without thinking.

"Don't you *language* me, Harrington."

Dustin's actually walking for once, pushing his bike so he won't hit Steve in the shins. He looks at the pale skies and sighs.

"Will's been through some shit this year, hasn't he?"

"We all have."

"I can't believe he was scared of telling us. I mean, he's our *wizard*. Did he think we were going to kick him out of the party?" Dustin shakes his head. "That's bullshit."

Steve grins and ruffles Dustin's hair. "Right on," he says. "That's bullshit."



**Author's Note:**

Thank you so much for reading! Comments make me bounce off the walls!

Also, hey psst old readers (and also new ones, idk) wanna support my real-life writing career? You can follow me on [Tumblr](#) about it.